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As Independence Day approaches, do you feel liberty and freedom are growing stronger in the United States or weaker?

Stronger

Weaker

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Wednesday, June 22, 2005

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SOUTH JERSEY

Nerve gas spill raises hackles of lawmakers

Wednesday, June 22, 2005

Assemblymen voice doubts about disposal plan

By JENNIFER BROOKS
Gannett News Service
WASHINGTON

An accidental spill of a deadly nerve agent at an Indiana weapons depot has raised concerns about plans to treat a byproduct of the nerve gas at a New Jersey facility and dump the residue in the Delaware River.

New Jersey lawmakers have ratcheted up their protests since the June 10 accident at the Newport Chemical Depot in Indiana.

No one was injured, but an estimated 30 gallons of VX nerve agent and its byproducts spilled into a containment area where workers were trying to dispose of the deadly substance.

The Army developed the gas as a weapon in the 1950s and accumulated large stockpiles, which it is destroying under terms of the Chemical Weapons Convention of 1997.

"If VX cannot be safely kept at an Army base, I certainly don't see how the people of New Jersey can trust the process to be secure enough for a 750-mile journey and another round of chemical processing," Sen. Jon Corzine, D-Hoboken, said during a Tuesday news conference. Corzine said the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection might step in to block the VX shipments as well.

The U.S. Army plans to ship 4 million gallons of a neutralized form of the nerve gas from Newport to a DuPont facility in Salem County for further treatment and final disposal into the Delaware River.

DuPont officials say their treatment process is safe. The plant recently used the same process to treat 5 million gallons of poisonous mustard gas left over from World War I.

Corzine and Rep. Rob Andrews, D-Haddon Heights, wrote a letter to the Army last week demanding an investigation of the spill. Andrews also inserted language into a recent defense authorization bill that would block shipments of VX or its byproducts from Indiana until the Pentagon completes several studies.

"The idea of taking risks with the health of 2 million people is unacceptable to us," Andrews said.

Andrews' provision would require the Army to treat and store VX on-site in Indiana. It also

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would require the Army to provide a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis to prove that sending the toxic waste to New Jersey would result in substantial savings to U.S. taxpayers.

Two state lawmakers released a statement opposing the transportation of the VX waste product through Burlington County.

Assemblyman Jack Conners, D-Pennsauken, and Assemblyman Herb Conaway, D-Delanco, said the spill has eroded their confidence in the Army's ability to handle the waste safely.

One routing plan calls for the material to be sent by rail to Morrisville, Pa., where it would be loaded on tanker trucks and driven to DuPont via the Pennsylvania Turnpike extension and the New Jersey Turnpike.

"We kept an open mind about the VX disposal issue . . . but this recent mishap in Indiana completely erodes our confidence and faith in the system that has been devised to dispose this toxic substance," Conners said.

Recent reports from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Environmental Protection Agency have raised questions about the safety and effectiveness of the current nerve gas disposal treatments. The EPA is expected to release an updated report this summer.

DuPont spokesman Anthony Farina said his company has worked closely with the EPA to address the agency's questions. In response to public concerns, he said DuPont is working on new treatment techniques that will reduce the amount of phosphorus byproduct that would be pumped into the river during the VX disposal process.

The VX residue that arrives in New Jersey would be a neutralized, broken-down form of the nerve agent - a caustic chemical compound, similar to drain cleaner.

"From day one, we said we would only accept shipments that contained no detectable levels of nerve agent," Farina said.

"The safety and protection of our workers, the community and the environment is our first priority in everything we do," said Col. Jesse Barber of the U.S. Army Chemical Materials Agency's Alternative Technologies and Approaches. His comments came in a news release Tuesday.

"After the destruction process occurs in Indiana, the very same priority will apply to the resulting wastewater, including safe transportation and safe treatment processing at the DuPont Secure Environmental Treatment facility in New Jersey," Barber said.

"As we have stated many times, no VX will be shipped off-site," Barber said in the release. "And, the proposed contract between the Army and DuPont will not be awarded until the CDC concerns have been addressed."

Corzine said the treatment process at the DuPont plant, which involves running the caustic residue through a series of carbon filters and treatment tanks, is the least effective of the 10 possible disposal methods for VX residue. Incineration is considered the most effective way to destroy all remnants of the nerve agent.

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